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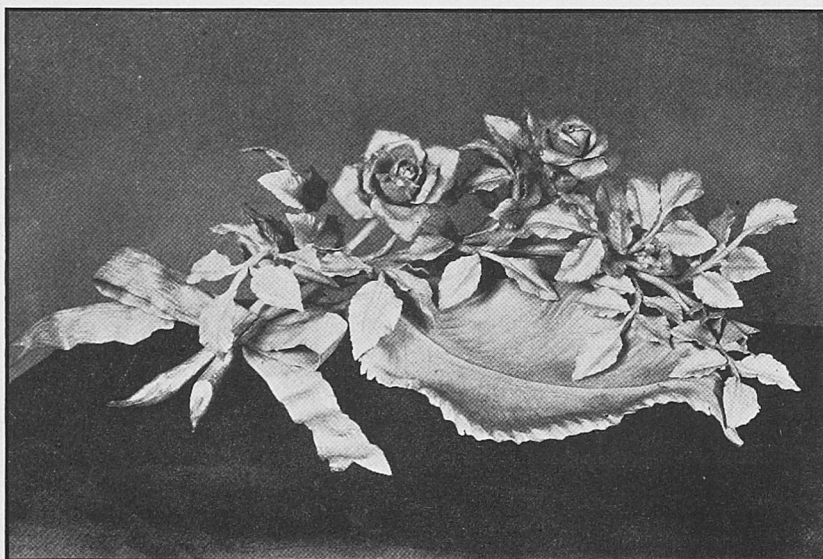
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ASH-
RECEIVER IN
WROUGHT
IRON



ROSE
WREATH
DESIGN

JAMES CRAN, CRAFTSMAN OF THE FORGE

BY ROBERT C. AULD

THE oldest of crafts, that of Tubal-cain, if not generally conceded to be one of the arts, has always been a useful one. But since the days of Robin Hood's strong men who sang of the smiters of iron down to the days when Longfellow was inspired by the village vulcan of his youth, the craft has had its high days and low.

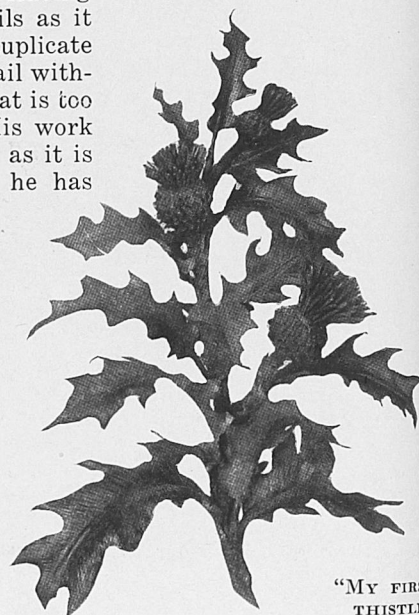
In its halcyon days the master farriers plied their craft and they were men of high lineage, earning their monarch's favor and founding noble houses that still exist and display the farrier's expressive symbol. In the days of chivalry this privileged order fashioned suits of armor and chain mail for the warrior and his horse as well as lance and sword for the knights to wield in gay tournament or more serious affairs. One of the greatest of these artificers was Andrew Farrar the Scot, who, going to Italy to learn the secrets of iron tempering, changed his name to the always familiar one of Andrea Ferrara and became famous as the fabricator of sword blades of the finest workmanship and temper.

There have been other craftsmen of the forge since then, notably Louis Van Boeckel the Belgian, who erected his studio at Lier, eleven miles from Antwerp, where he turned out marvelous work which was patronized by every royal head in Europe. He was awarded the Grand Prix at the Liège Exhibition of 1905 for a group representing an eagle and a mythical monster in conflict. But Van Boeckel has apparently found a competitor, at least in floral designing, in this country, James Cran the Poughkeepsie blacksmith, some of whose work is represented in the illustrations produced here.

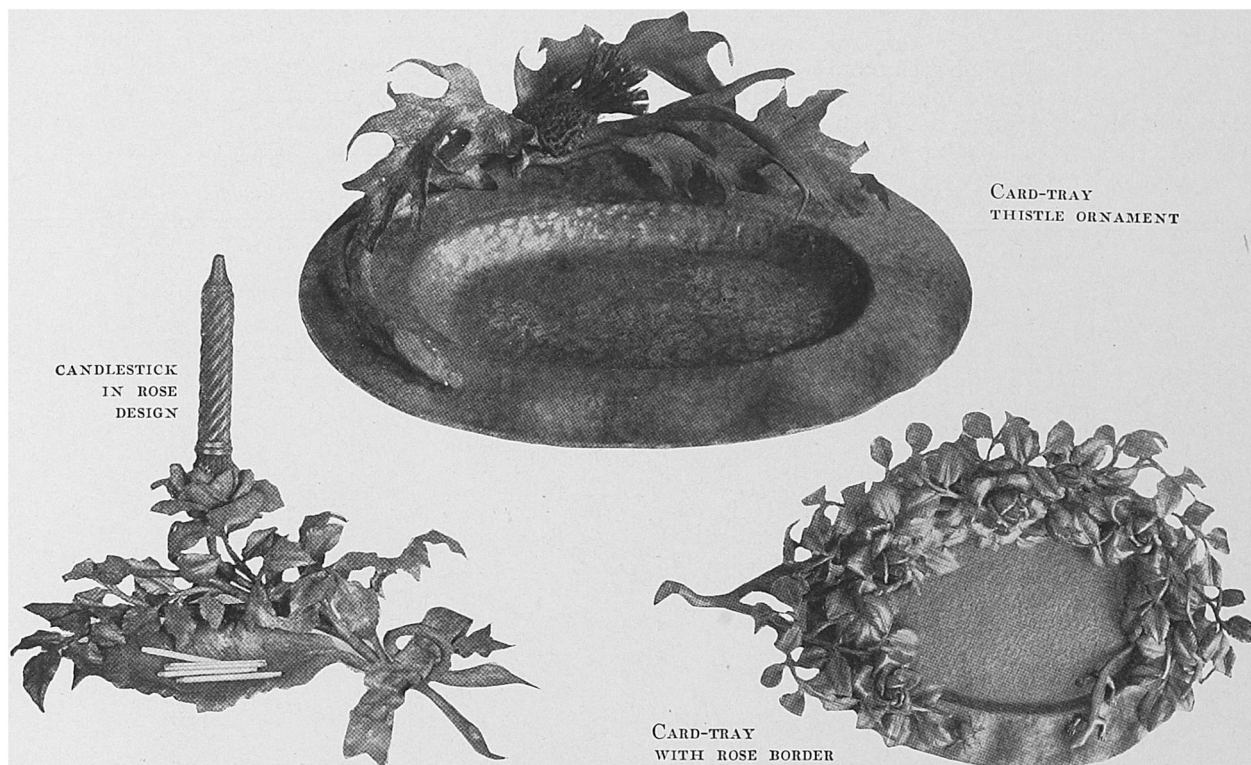
How he came to engage in this work is interesting, for in his case it was a matter of imagination that suddenly became inflamed. On the occasion of a visit he made to Mr. Dixie in the office of *The American Machinist*, a conversation took place which turned to art-smithery; and Mr. Dixie mentioned the famous Van Boeckel, showing Mr. Cran some of the Belgian's work, a rose of iron, which rather staggered the blacksmith. After a careful examination

he determined to try his hand at the same sort of work believing he could produce as good or better. Feeling that he must not acknowledge defeat, even in this class of smithing, he went to work and after several efforts sent Mr. Dixie within a month some samples which that authority pronounced: "Better than any of Van Boeckel's which I have so far seen. The actual blacksmithing, as apart from the art feature, is better. The welds are cleaner and neater and the smith has gone closer to nature to get his model."

It is therefore with new interest that one examines Mr. Cran's work and method. While a close student of nature he works entirely from memory with no models before him. He knows what effect he wants to produce and stores that up in his mind to be created by his hands. "I take from nature," he says, "the points that are most suggestive of what I have in mind to produce, leaving out the minor details as it is impossible to duplicate nature in every detail without getting work that is too dead and stiff." His work is more remarkable as it is the only art work he has ever done; and he has done it in his spare hours, after engrossing labor during the day. When living in Plainfield, New Jersey, he worked in a small shop behind his cosy home, with anvil, hammer, tongs and pliers and a few other small tools, all made by himself. With a love



"MY FIRST
THISTLE"



inborn of the creative faculty he went about his work with a dash and artistic freedom that was rare, producing things which we could never have thought possible from such dour, intractable material. It must be said that here was the "art severe," but where the mind leads, there the service of the willing hands will follow. Fired by a temperamental imagination and burning with the desire to reproduce things satisfying to behold, he was able to charm the unwilling medium into forms of beauty.

All day engaged in superintending the most intricate and exact work in forging the products of a great tool work where he resided, it was, as we have seen, in his leisure hours that he sought his opportunity to wrest creations of growing things in graceful naturalness from the anvil. Not only the flowers of the field but the fruit of the grape and wild berry sprang forth by the cunning manipulation of the "brawny man" with the delicate touch. Rose and thistle, spray and festoon of blossoms, with delicacy of tracery and graceful outline, responded to the beckoning of his mind. No wonder the sonorous notes of his anvil made cheery music o' nights to the neighbors and passers-by; they loved his industry for it brought them joy in the morning. They marveled that this son of Vulcan, accustomed to Herculean work, could produce such fragile, delicate shapes. His method is as natural as it is unique. For one design he makes from sixty to a hundred or more pieces, all separate, using one-quarter and three-eighths inch round Swedish iron. In forming a leaf the iron is heated and flattened on the anvil and the outline shaped. The rib is made by bending the leaf on the edge of the anvil and when it is laid rib up, the radial ribs or veins are struck in with the cross-peen of the hammer. With the latter slightly tilted, the blows are directed toward the outside of the leaf, producing the serrated edge.

Every rose has twenty-three petals and each is hammered out as are the leaves separately. Once

the entire number is forged, they are assembled and held together in the round tongs, each petal being welded about a centre. After all the petals are added, the bloom seems practically finished, but it must once more be reheated so that with the aid of the pliers the petals may be bent back and curled in accordance with their natural tendency. Petal, leaf and calyx are shaped separately and after they are all perfectly fashioned they are ready for welding.

Withal Mr. Cran is modest in his estimation of his work: "In roses," he says, "I only try to reproduce petals and leaves. In making petals it is impossible to get them as fine as in the natural rose and to overcome this and give them a delicate appearance I crimp and curl the edges, putting a dent here and there to give the effect of shading. I do the same thing with the leaves, and arrange them in an easy, careless manner to attain the best result." A spray of leaves can be made in thirty minutes. To reproduce a rose with all the soft appearance of the natural flower, with long stem, takes about one hundred and thirty-five minutes. The welding of the leaves to the stem takes about fifteen minutes longer.

James Cran, the fabricator of these metal floral specimens, is a native of Aberdeenshire, Scotland, and was brought up on a farm in the outlying district of that country.

He came to America in 1896. After working at his craft in the East and West he was for a while instructor in ironwork in the State College at Manhattan, Kansas, and is now settled at Poughkeepsie in this State. He has put his hand to all kinds of smithy work from heavy marine forging to the most intricate parts of small and delicate machinery. That he has the real creative instinct is shown by the wonderful manual gift he possesses and the taste and skill he has employed in producing such rare examples of art-craft in a medium difficult to handle.